

CAPTAIN AMERICA

and the Struggle
of the Superhero

CRITICAL ESSAYS

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McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina 28640
www.mcfarlandpub.com

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The Invaders and the All-Star Squadron

Roy Thomas Revisits the Golden Age

MARK R. McDERMOTT

Introduction

By the mid-1970's, many fans of the "Golden Age" of comic books had grown up to become writers and ultimately editors for the comics publishers, sometimes setting the narrative histories for their favorite childhood characters themselves. Many of these fans-turned-pro produced comics series that attempted to recapture the Golden Age's excitement, patriotic fervor and whiz-bang attitude. The most successful of these titles were produced by Roy Thomas, who fashioned a coherent history of costumed heroes during World War II, and reconciled the wildly inconsistent stories of the 1940's with tightly patrolled continuity initiated with the "Silver Age" of the 1960's. With *The Invaders* (1975-1979), Thomas focused on the hitherto unrevealed wartime exploits of Marvel Comics' early mainstays Captain America, the Human Torch, and Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner. In 1980, he moved to DC Comics and launched *All-Star Squadron*, which juggled the histories of the Justice Society of America and nearly a hundred secondary characters. Thomas "kept 'em flying" even as DC made a series of revamps to its super-hero "universe" that invalidated most of what he had written, finally giving up in his successor title, *Young All-Stars*, in 1989.

In order to understand Thomas' achievement as an energetic synthesizer of the past, we should first review the common themes of the Golden Age of Comic Books in the 1940's.

"Let's give Adolf the Bum's Rush!"¹ *World War II and The Golden Age*

Even before the United States entered World War II, her comic book agents had begun duking it out with thinly disguised overseas dictators and saboteurs. Many of the comics' artists and writers were highly sensitive to the situation in Europe; they were immigrant or second-generation European Jews with relatives being ground further each day under the heel of Nazi repression. If America would not yet act on behalf of those oppressed peoples, perhaps the symbols of America could be employed instead. Superman, whose red and blue costume had been compared to an American flag, already had run-ins with tin pot European dictators. But the most popular patriotic superhero was co-authored by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. In 2007, Simon reflected, "...I thought to myself: 'Why don't we use a real villain instead of trying to

make one up? I put Hitler as the villain and that came across great, so it was just a matter of getting a hero to fight him," (Morse). Jack Kirby had simply declared, "Drape the flag on anything and it looks good!" (Steranko 53).

Almost a year before America was drawn into the conflict, the inaugural cover of Timely's² *CAC 1* (March 1941) portrayed Hitler's headquarters—where "Sabotage Plans for U.S.A." were being studied and a television showed a saboteur dynamiting a "U.S. Munitions Works" building. Meanwhile, Captain America burst in to sock Der Führer in the mush. Of all the flag-waving heroes, Captain America's context best represented the American self-image; Cap's defensive shield protected him against enemy fire, until he gained the opportunity to strike back with his fists. The emblematic cover to *CAC 13*, the first produced after Pearl Harbor, showed Cap and his sidekick Bucky as colossi striding across the Pacific Ocean to smack down a fanged Japanese soldier, as Cap vows, "You started it, now we'll finish it!" (Avison).

Timely/Marvel's two other main stars had appeared before Cap, in *Marvel Comics 1* (Oct.–Nov. 1939). Despite his name, the Human Torch was an android, with the ability to burst into flame, fly, and throw fireballs. The Sub-Mariner, Namor, was the half-human prince of the undersea kingdom of Atlantis. When the "surface world's" depredations endangered his home, Namor engaged in a campaign to wipe out all air-breathers. As war clouds drew closer, Namor decided that, for now, the Nazis represented the greatest threat to his people. He and the Torch turned to incinerating armies and spies, locating and flooding transoceanic invasion tunnels. The Torch acquired his own sidekick, a boy named Toro, who had similar flaming powers.

The youthful enthusiasm with which the writers and artists of the Golden Age sent their characters through their paces could only have come about in the atmosphere of a world war. The battles against Nazi villains and fifth columnists were written at a time when victory in the war was not certain, lending urgency to each adventure. This atmosphere could not be matched after the war, even when Timely/Atlas brought back its headline characters to fight the Red Menace.

Although Cap, Namor and the Torch appeared together on the covers of several Timely comics, the three never actually teamed up until the post-war *All-Winners Comics*. The first true team of heroes met in the pages of DC Comics's³ *All Star Comics*, home to the Justice Society of America (JSA). *All-Star* had started as an anthology title for characters who didn't have solo titles yet. Issue 3 (Winter 1940) saw the first meeting of the JSA, with the Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern, Spectre, Hourman, Doctor Fate, the Atom and Sandman. Later, as members gained their individual titles, they acquired honorary status, and were replaced by other second string characters. Wonder Woman, the champion for gender equality, was allowed to join as their "recording secretary."

The JSA did their part for the war effort by raising millions for war orphans (7, Oct.–Nov. 1941), time-traveling to the far future in search of a defense against aerial bombardment (10, April–May 1942), or briefly enlisting in their civilian identities (11, June–July 1942). The JSA never squabbled like Namor and Torch did.

Despite the power marshaled by the wartime costumed heroes, they never were able to take on the matter of the war itself. Why couldn't Superman just fly to Berlin and bring back Hitler's head on a pike? Before the war, the Sub-Mariner's battle against the Human Torch (in *Marvel Mystery Comics 8–10* [June–Aug. 1940]) saw him raise a tidal wave to destroy Manhattan; an event acknowledged as canon in the 1994 mini-series *Marvels*. Why didn't he do the same for the Japanese islands? Steve Rogers and Bucky did ship out to the front, in fact, *CAC* had Cap fighting in Europe, the Pacific and the home front in different stories in the

same issue. But even a one-man army was still just one man. The 2007 miniseries, *Captain America: The Chosen*, had Cap explaining that the “Project: Rebirth” that created him has already been breached by the Nazis, so Steve Rogers was hidden in plain sight at Fort Lehigh: “The government knew I wasn’t immortal. They were afraid of losing a one-of-a-kind weapon that they’d spent millions to develop. So they turned me into a freak show” (Morrell 15).

The costumed contingent could have ended the war in their fictional world, but in our reality, the real war was still going on.

“Got Any Back Issues?” *The Birth of Comics Fandom and the Silver Age*

The near collapse of the comic book industry during the 1950’s coincided with the start of organized comics fandom. The fan movement can be said to have started with the “E.C. Fan-Addict” clubs who organized chapters and called for members in the letters pages of E.C. Comics’ horror and science-fiction books. The collapse of the E.C. line in late 1954 (with their humor comic, *Mad*, surviving in magazine format), was followed less than a year later by the debut of the first “Silver Age” character, DC’s Martian Manhunter, as a backup feature, in Batman’s *Detective Comics* 225, Nov. 1955, and then in an update of the Flash, in *Showcase* 4, Sept.–Oct. 1956. Urged on by sales figures and a contingent of letter-writing fans, editor Julius Schwartz revived other Golden Age characters with new Atomic Age back-stories, and in 1959 banded them together as the Justice League of America (JLA).

The letters columns in comics featuring the new characters changed from kids asking what was in Batman’s utility belt, to teens and adults asking for more Golden Age revivals. Roy Thomas (b. Nov. 22, 1940) was one of that generation of comic fandom. In 1960, while a senior at Southeast Missouri State College, he wrote a fan letter to Schwartz and JLA writer Gardner F. Fox. Schwartz put Thomas in touch with Dr. Jerry G. Bails, an assistant professor of Natural History at Wayne State University. Bails had founded the Academy of Comic-Book Fans and Collectors, and had begun documenting the early history of comics by interviewing their creators. Thomas contributed humor pieces to Bails’ first issue of *Alter Ego* (1961), the first all-comics fanzine.

Bails and Thomas were among many fans asking DC to revive its original Golden Age heroes. Schwartz obliged them in “Flash of Two Worlds,” (*Flash* 123, Sept. 1961). The modern Flash found himself on an alternate world he christened Earth-2, where he encountered his Golden Age counterpart, a little grayer but still active. A later team-up (129, June 1962) included a cameo of the Justice Society taking their costumes out of mothballs; and in 1963, they guest-starred in *JLA* 21 and 22, inaugurating an annual crossover tradition whose titles derived from the “Crisis on Earth-1” pattern.

The sales success of *JLA* was noted by Stan Lee, editor and head writer for Atlas/Marvel Comics. After struggling with weird science fiction, teen humor, and other genres of the moment, Lee got back into the superhero field, and, with Jack Kirby, produced the Fantastic Four, a fractious, dysfunctional superhero team. Their ranks included a new Human Torch, the hot-headed teenager Johnny Storm. In *Fantastic Four* 4 (May 1962), he discovered the Sub-Mariner, an amnesiac derelict in a Bowery flophouse. Later, Namor regained his senses, and, finding his old kingdom devastated by atomic testing, renewed his war against the surface world. The “Marvel Age” was underway.

Marvel expanded its pantheon of new heroes with the likes of the Amazing Spider-Man, Doctor Strange, Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, Thor and Ant-Man, the latter four of which teamed in 1963 as the Avengers. In the fourth issue of *their* book (March 1964), the Avengers found Captain America, encased in an iceberg in suspended animation. He had been caught in the explosion of a booby-trapped experimental plane, that also killed Bucky, making him Marvel's first hero-martyr.⁴ The original Human Torch was accounted for in *Fantastic Four Annual 4* (1966), where he battled Johnny Storm, under the control of the Mad Thinker, and nobly sacrificed his existence to save the youngster.

The world at large was becoming aware that grown men were collecting and analyzing comic books. The first fan conventions, in 1964, were profiled in the *New York Times*. *Village Voice* cartoonist Jules Feiffer, who had started as an assistant on Will Eisner's *Spirit* comic, recalled his experiences as a fan and young comics artist in *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965), which reprinted several key Golden Age stories. This was the first book in almost any public library on the topic of comic books. *Newsweek* covered the fan phenomenon in the "Life and Leisure" section of its February 15, 1965, issue, asserting that serious collectors would pay the outlandish sum of \$100 for a copy of *Action Comics 1* (Superfans).

"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility": Thomas' Marvel Career

Roy Thomas, at the time, had become one of the first comic fans to turn "pro." In 1964, while teaching high school, he began free-lancing scripts to Charlton Comics' *Son of Vulcan* and *Blue Beetle* series. His correspondence with Schwartz, Fox, and Superman writer, Otto Binder, led them to offer him a job at DC Comics, but it lasted all of two weeks. Common wisdom was that he didn't get along with Superman editor Mort Weisinger. Marvel then offered him a job, and Thomas quickly established himself as their "second writer." When Stan Lee gave up writing chores on each of his growing stable of titles, Thomas was usually the person to take over the book.

In *Doctor Strange*, *Fantastic Four*, *Sub-Mariner*, and others, Thomas expanded on Lee's formula of "heroes with problems." Whereas Stan and Steve Ditko might get a one-panel gag out of Spider-Man getting a head cold, Thomas would inflict him with a chronic duodenal ulcer, and have him swing into action wearing a cheap Halloween Spidey mask because his real one was tacked up on J. Jonah Jameson's bulletin board (*Amazing Spider-Man 113*, Oct. 1972).

Thomas' most popular work in the Marvel hero genre was his stint as writer on *The Avengers*, from 35–102 (Dec. 1966 – Sept. 1972), and as editor, with Steve Englehart as scripter, through 132 (Feb. 1975). Roy kept the team's revolving roster balanced between powerful, confident characters and the second stringers. He maintained the readers' identification with lesser characters (like Ant-Man or trick archer Hawkeye) unsure of their worthiness to stand beside Iron Man or the mythical gods, Thor and Hercules. He also fleshed out Captain America's character as the team's longstanding leader. While the Lee-Kirby run, in *ToS*, dwelled largely on Cap as a man out of his own time, Thomas' Cap, in the *Avengers*, was automatically accorded respect even by the non-member guest characters. It was this characterization of Cap that would later be acknowledged as the "moral center" of the Marvel hero community.

The Golden Age was never far from Thomas' writing. In *Sub-Mariner 14* (June 1969), he finally introduced the now-grown Toro, brainwashed into believing himself the original Human Torch. Toro battled Namor before regaining his senses and sacrificing his life, as his mentor had. In *Avengers 71* (Dec. 1969), Thomas sent the team back to 1941 as pawns of meddling cosmic games-men, to encounter the Golden Age Captain America, Namor and Human Torch. For the proto-Invaders, Thomas coined the battle cry, "Okay, Axis, Here We Come!"⁵ This was from the title of Don Thompson's essay on the wartime Timely heroes in *All in Color for a Dime*. This series ran in the science fiction fanzine, *Xero*, from 1960 to 1963, and was collected in book form in 1970 (Lupoff).

During this time, Thomas also had taken on management duties at Marvel, gaining the title of associate editor. In 1970, he convinced Marvel to purchase adaptation rights to *Conan the Barbarian*, and went on to write the popular *Conan* comic series for ten years (Thompson 9).

In 1972, Stan Lee was named Publisher of Marvel Comics, and Roy succeeded him as editor-in-chief. Thomas would resign after two years; some reports claimed Marvel's corporate structure was unresponsive to his ideas. Four other editors took the job and resigned within eighteen months. To keep Thomas on salary, Marvel created the position of Writer/Editor for him. Thomas would choose and work with the artists directly, write letter columns and keep his books on schedule, answerable only to Lee. (Thompson 10).

Now, Thomas could propose the series he'd always wanted to do: a comic set during World War II, starring Captain America, the Human Torch, the Sub-Mariner, and their kid side-kicks. Thomas had wanted to call his team the All-Winners Squad, after the postwar team the group had formed for only two adventures in *All-Winners Comics* in 1946. Stan Lee lobbied for "The Invaders," in keeping with the action-oriented nomenclature of their other teams, Avengers and Defenders, which coincidentally were the titles of popular 1960s television shows. *The Invaders* was launched with a *Giant-Size Invaders* special, dated June, 1975.

"Okay, Axis, Here We Come!" *The Invaders*

Giant-Size Invaders' cover showed the team symbolically striding over the Earth, brushing off machine gun fire as Captain America sets foot on a map of Nazi territory, labeled with a swastika and the words "Fortress Europa." The series opened in the weeks just after Pearl Harbor, as Cap and Bucky encountered the Human Torch and Toro. The pair had learned that a Nazi cyborg named Brain Drain had captured one of the scientists involved in creating Cap's Super-Soldier formula, and extracted enough information to create his own Aryan super-soldier, Master Man. The four rushed to thwart Master Man's attack on British ships in Chesapeake Bay, where they encountered the Sub-Mariner guarding Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Winnie convinced the group to form a team to help defend his beleaguered country until America's armed forces could be built up. The heroes agreed, accepting Churchill's suggestion of "Invaders" as their name.

The regular *Invaders* series ran for 41 issues, through 1979. It featured the team based in London, getting around in Namor's Atlantean submersible jet flagship, making forays into Germany, returning to America several times, and fighting Rommel's army in Egypt.

Thomas often used *The Invaders'* letter column to spell out his plans for the book. One goal was to capture the thrill of the wartime comics he had enjoyed as a kid. He also wanted to come up with stories to match the action portrayed on many Golden Age covers. Stories

in which, together, Cap, Namor and the Torch rescued Bucky and Toro from fiendish death traps. The covers almost never matched the stories inside, so Thomas would write stories to match those cover scenes, even if they were factually deficient. For instance, the cover of *All-Select 1* (Fall 1943) showed the heroes storming a medieval castle with a banner identifying it as “Hitler’s Berchtesgaden.” Although the real Berchtesgaden was a 20th Century villa, Thomas had it drawn to match the old cover, explaining his rationale in the letters column of *20* (Sept. 1977).

Primarily, Thomas used *The Invaders* to craft a definitive history of the Marvel Universe in World War II. He declared that the stories published during the war should be viewed as apocryphal, or only “based” on the characters’ “actual” classified wartime adventures unless conformed as part of Marvel canon in *The Invaders*. In 1965, Lee and Kirby had tried to codify Captain America’s wartime history (*ToS* 63-71), re-telling Cap and Bucky’s origins and some of their wartime exploits, which included the origin of the Red Skull.

Freed from the constraints of old histories, Thomas mapped out the Invaders’ exploits in Europe. The team crossed paths with the Red Skull only once, in Issues 5–6 (March–May 1976), which showed that, while stateside, the team was captured by the Skull and brain-washed into committing public acts of sabotage. Bucky, left behind by the Skull as not being “worth the bother,” sought out other Golden Age Timely heroes: the Whizzer, Miss America, Jack Frost, the Blue Diamond, Red Raven and the Patriot. They banded together as the Liberty Legion to rescue the Invaders, and stayed together as a home front defense group. The Liberty Legion had been intended as a spin-off series. When that failed to get off the ground, the story that would have launched their Liberty Legion’s comic was recycled into an Invaders case. The Liberty Legion also established a relationship between the Whizzer and Miss America, who during the Marvel Age had been named the parents of Avengers Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch.

In *Invaders 7* (July 1976), they became guests of Lord Montgomery Falsworth, a patriarch of British super nobility: he had been a hero named Union Jack during World War I, working with an international fighting group named Freedom’s Five. The Five’s few flashback panels represented the first major extension of Marvel’s hero history to before its 1940s roots — discounting its many masked Western characters. Thomas was building the foundation for a world in which it was natural to put on a costume to confront society’s fears. Union Jack is, incidentally, one of Thomas’ most brilliant creations and, along with Captain Britain, can be seen as a British Captain America invoking the same patriotic undercurrent.

Union Jack got back into costume when London was being terrorized by his old enemy Baron Blood, a vampire now working for the Nazis. Blood was destroyed after being revealed as Falsworth’s brother John, but not before irreparably crushing Union Jack’s legs and draining the blood from his daughter Jacqueline. She was saved by a blood transfusion from the Human Torch, which gave her super speed, and let her join the Invaders as Spitfire (*12*, Jan. 1977). A later story introduced Jacqueline’s brother Brian, a former Nazi collaborationist disowned by their father. Brian ended up confined in a German prison, where he met a dissident scientist who possessed yet another version of the Super-Soldier formula. Brian had become the Mighty Destroyer, one of the few Golden Age heroes to work behind enemy lines (*18–19*; July–Aug. 1977). He would later succeed his father as Union Jack.

The Invaders carried many touches bordering on self-referential clues to comics fans; none more so than Issues *14–15* (Mar.–Apr. 77). Here, the team encountered the Crusaders, a group that resembled the Freedom Fighters, a team of former Quality Comics characters, which

was being published by DC at the time. Simultaneously, DC's *Freedom Fighters* comic had them facing another set of Crusaders, who were analogues of the Invaders. It was a goof hatched by Thomas and *Freedom Fighters* writer Martin Pasko, but when it was over, Thomas found a role for Crusader members Dyna-mite, who would become the second Destroyer, and the Spirit of '76, about whom more will be mentioned later.

Roy did not neglect his trademark Marvel-style characterization of his heroes, either. In his original wartime stories, Captain America may not have carried a gun, but he jumped behind any handy machine gun to mow down hordes of Japanese. In *The Invaders*, Cap became pensive about his life of constant battle, and in Issue 10, an offhand reference to the Grim Reaper had him pondering that death is "...always looking over our shoulders ... mine, even a lad like Bucky's," as he glanced significantly at the doomed youngster (Thomas 2). During the 1940's the android origins of the Human Torch had been forgotten completely. Now, he and his teammates knew he was an artificial man, and in private moments he pined for Jacqueline Falsworth, wondering if he could ever truly fit in with the world. Namor was still Prince Namor, and though he fought for the Allies, he made it clear that he had only temporarily called off war against all air-breathers. He questioned the wisdom of his colleagues who brought their child sidekicks along to face deadly danger, but was more than cooperative when the enemy was in sight.

As *The Invaders* revisited the wartime years, it also reviewed some of the 1940s attitudes through the filter of the 1970s. In Issues 12–13 (Jan.–Feb. 1977), the Invaders went to the Warsaw ghetto to rescue a rabbi, Jacob Goldstein, whom the Nazis held prisoner to blackmail his scientist brother in England. When a Panzer division took the Invaders captive, Goldstein built a golem to rescue them. He refused the Invaders' offer of sanctuary in England, hoping, as other ghetto residents might have, that things couldn't possibly get any worse for them.

The confrontation with America's wartime prejudices was part of a long story arc, starting in Issue 16 (May 1977). It started with the abduction, in London, of American soldier Biljo White, named after a fanzine artist who was a friend of Thomas. The fictional White was the writer of a comic book character, "Major Victory," who gained his power from a "Super-Soldier Formula," and the Nazis presumed he had some knowledge of the real formula.

In trying to rescue White, the Invaders were captured by Master Man, and brought before Hitler at the "castle" Berchtesgaden. Hitler made the mistake of many melodrama villains: instead of having them killed immediately, he ordered the Invaders shipped to Berlin to be paraded through the streets, before their public execution. The Invaders, of course, made their escape, but not before Toro was mortally wounded by gunfire. The Torch incinerated the shooter on the spot, something he did often in the 1940's adventures, but here it was a rare occurrence that demonstrated the desperate situation of the war.

This plotline took six issues to get this far, and Toro would remain at "death's door" for six more issues. This was partly due to the "Dreaded Deadline Doom," an affliction striking several Marvel comics in the 1970s. The company had been adding titles faster than its editors, writers and artists could keep on schedule. Rather than skip a month, many *Invaders* issues surprised readers with a reprint.

Some of these reprints were welcomed by Golden Age fans, especially the one in 20 (Sept. 1977). The first "Sub-Mariner" story in *Marvel Comics 1* had never been clearly reprinted because the artwork was altered to create underwater effects, leaving the pages too murky to copy. But artist Bill Everett had originally drawn the story for *Motion Picture Funnies Weekly*, an attempted movie theatre premium. Everett's studio re-used the Sub-Mariner story when

they were contracted by Timely to produce *Marvel Comics*. The existence of *MPFW* was unconfirmed until six copies turned up in 1974. The story was photostatted from that comic for reprint in *The Invaders*.

Bucky flew Toro to the “only surgeon in the world who could save him,” while the Human Torch told the adult Invaders Toro’s “secret origin” (22, Nov. 1977). We learned that Toro was in fact a mutant, a fashionable thing to be in a Marvel comic at that time. The adults then went to Egypt (23, Dec. 1977) to help the British war effort there. They encountered the Scarlet Scarab, an Egyptian superhero who saw no difference between Nazi invasion and continued British imperialism in his country. To the dismay of British members Spitfire and Union Jack, Sub-Mariner agreed with this assessment, and even Captain America admitted that the Scarab had a point. The Scarab did help the Invaders after Rommel’s troops callously destroyed an Egyptian village, but he had served notice that the Allied cause was not necessarily his own, and the Invaders found themselves in political disagreement for the first time.

When Bucky arrived in California (26, March 1978), he discovered that Dr. Sabuki, the surgeon Toro needed, had just been caught up by the presidential order interning Japanese-Americans in relocation camps. Thomas spared no details in representing the American attitude toward the Nisei. A camp’s commander questioned Captain America’s loyalty when he expressed his outrage that such a thing could happen, and a “100% American” chortling to Bucky that he’d purchased a “traitor’s” house for a song. Before Sabuki could finally save Toro’s life, Bucky, his daughter Gwenny-Lou, and Davy Mitchell, a black delivery boy who happened to be in Toro’s hospital room, were abducted by Agent Axis, three agents from each Axis country who’d been fused into a single body.

By the end of the adventure, Davy and Gwenny-Lou had gained super-powers and took the names the Human Top and Golden Girl. These were two more Golden Age characters recast by Thomas. The original, blonde Golden Girl, Betty Ross, a supporting character from the start of *CAC*, had replaced Bucky at Captain America’s side after the war. As to the Human Top, Thomas had often expressed a desire to rectify the seeming coincidence that those magic bolts of lightning had always struck white people. Bucky and Toro decided to stay stateside with their new friends, and form the Kid Commandos. This group supplanted the Young Allies, a kid group that had their own title during the war.

Roy had avoided bringing in younger versions of later Marvel characters as guest stars. Even though many heroes in the 1960s had been established as war veterans, he reasoned that during the 1942 period of his book, none of them had gone into combat yet (Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos made a cameo in Times Square, before shipping out to the ETO). He finally broke that rule in Issue 32 (Sept. 78). Hitler, theorizing that Wagner’s Ring operas seemed echoes from another world, commissioned a scientist and his mysterious, bandaged assistant to construct a viewer to show him this mythic realm. With this viewer tuned to an Asgard already familiar to Marvel fans, Der Führer was able to summon the mighty Thor to Earth.

Solely through his persuasive abilities, Hitler convinced Thor that his people were in a holy war against barbarians on all sides. Did not Germany’s most powerful foes call themselves “the Invaders?” Thor flew to Russia to battle his future comrades, who were accompanying Josef Stalin. When Thor appeared to have killed Stalin, Hitler prepared to bring armies of Asgardians to Earth, but he was stopped by the inventor’s assistant, who destroyed the televiewer and let Hitler live only because, “I recognized you as one who will bring down

the wrath of a planet upon your head.” This assistant was revealed to the reader as young Victor von Doom (33 27). Thor, who had been able to mystically overhear Hitler’s ranting, decided this was not his fight and returned to Asgard, taking away all memories of this encounter.

For the 1977 *Invaders Annual*, Golden Age artists Don Rico and Alex Schomburg returned to draw the characters they had worked on in the 1940s. In the story, Thomas told the Invaders’ side of their encounter with the Avengers in the story he had written years before. He contrived a story to explain why Cap had his original triangular shield in that story, and the Sub-Mariner had his original black trunks instead of his green ones.

Thomas elaborated on Marvel history in *What If?* in 1977. This was a series edited by Thomas in which alternate Marvel histories were presented, based on turning points in a character’s career. However, Issue 4 was presented as Marvel canon, filling in Timely’s post-war history. “What If the Invaders Had Stayed Together After World War Two?” opened at the war’s end, just after Captain America and Bucky disappeared. Thomas wrote how Hitler died in the Marvel Universe: the Human Torch burned into Hitler’s bunker, offering him a chance to surrender to the Americans rather than face the tender mercies of the Soviet army. In the ensuing confusion, the Torch accidentally incinerated Adolf and Eva. Later, learning of Cap’s disappearance, the Torch and Namor flew to Washington, where President Truman urged them and the Liberty Legion to remain together, validating the two “All-Winners Squad” stories published in 1946. Cap’s apparent death was to be kept a secret, with the Crusaders’ Spirit of ’76 substituting for him. The Squad’s casebook eventually took them to Boston, where another android, created by the Torch’s “father,” planned to abduct a young war hero who was running for Congress, John Kennedy, and replace him with an android. In the ensuing battle, Captain America II was killed, to be replaced with former Liberty Legion member the Patriot. This Cap retired some time after the war.⁶

The Invaders soldiered on, but sales had begun eroding. Thomas convinced Marvel to license a comics tie-in to a little-promoted movie called *Star Wars*. The adaptation became one of the best-selling comics in Marvel history, and Roy scripted the ongoing *Star Wars* series, bringing in other writers on titles he edited, including Don Glut on *Invaders* (Decker).

In the midst of a return battle with Baron Blood (40, May 1979), Roy announced in the letters column that the series had been cancelled. He was allowed to wrap up the loose threads in a final issue four months later, in which the team fought a group of their Axis foes in Chicago. The fight was highlighted when the Sub-Mariner extinguished a brainwashed Torch by filling the Petrillo Bandshell filled with water, with a climactic battle at Riverside Park.

The Invaders was not without its detractors during its run, much of which centered on the artwork. Thomas’ extensive historical research was aided by veteran penciler Frank Robbins, a onetime partner of Kirby, who had drawn the aviation strip *Scorchy Smith* and who created the similar *Johnny Hazard* (Horn 584). Thomas valued Robbins’ experience and historical knowledge, but many readers were too used to Marvel’s slicker house art style. Robbins’ idiosyncratic art looked to some like a series of Milton Caniff swipes, and inker Frank Springer’s heavy black spots suffered in the letterpress printing used for 70s comics. Robbins left after Issue 28, and penciling chores fell to Paul Kupperberg and others. Jack Kirby did draw many *Invaders* covers, but no story pages.

As noted, Thomas’ books often fell victim to the Dreaded Deadline Doom. Editors joked about “DDD” in their editorials, but it was a serious problem, caused by Marvel adding more

titles to capture more retail display space. When Jim Shooter took over as editor-in-chief, in 1978, he worked to halt the reprints by pushing editors to build up their inventory. He then eliminated the writer/editor job title. After Thomas, every editor-in-chief had taken the title as compensation, including Marv Wolfman, Gerry Conway and Archie Goodwin. Jack Kirby got the title because he was, well, Jack Kirby. As the writer/editors' contracts expired, Shooter offered them new contracts as writers only. Thomas quit to accept a similar job title at DC, to produce 100 comics pages a month (Thompson, 11).

Thomas occasionally scripted other *Invaders* adventures in later years. A 1993 mini-series featured the Battle-Axis, whose members Thomas drew from defunct publishers' characters now in public domain. These borrowed characters were American heroes who were motivated to turn against their country (e.g., Fox Publishing's Spider-Queen's scientist husband had been murdered by Soviet spies, and Harvey Comics' Human Meteor's Irish heritage set him against anyone who was allied with the British). In 2005, Thomas wrote a story for *Giant-Size Invaders #2* to bookend a collection of *Invaders* and Golden Age reprints. In this adventure the Invaders stopped Nazi agents, who had taken a formula to become powerful giants, in an attempt to assassinate Churchill and FDR. Their mission thwarted, the agents' formula caused them to self-destruct. Speaking from the author's post-9/11 perspective, Captain America remarked, presciently, "If those two were aware they'd die within moments of killing the Allied leaders, that's bad news. That kind of assassin's a lot harder to stop than one who hopes to survive his mission: If the day ever comes when America confronts a horde of suicidal fanatics—it's liable to find them even harder to defeat than an army" (2005, 16).

As of this writing, popular artist Alex Ross is co-plotting, with Jim Krueger, an *Avengers/Invaders* miniseries that will see the Invaders of 1942 time-traveling to the post-*Civil War* America of 2008.

"Just Imagine! All Your Favorite Heroes Together!" The Secret Origin of The All-Star Squadron

There had been several developments in the DC line that laid the background for Thomas' next nostalgia book. The Justice League/Justice Society team-ups had greatly expanded what would become known as the DC Multiverse. Especially in the 1970s, DC began re-introducing characters they'd purchased from defunct publishers, to be used during the JLA/JSA crossovers in their own universes. In *JLA 107–108* (Sept./Oct.–Nov./Dec. 1973), Quality Comic heroes Uncle Sam, Doll Man, Phantom Lady, Black Condor, the Ray, and the Human Bomb were found on Earth-X, where the Nazis had won World War II. In 1976, the JLA/JSA met Captain Marvel and his Fawcett Comics cohort on Earth-S (for Shazam!) (*JLA 135–137*).

DC had revived *All-Star Comics* in 1975, with the Justice Society. The first issue's letter column carried letters from longtime JSA supporters, Jerry Bails and Roy Thomas (*All-Star 58 32*). Thomas had earlier proposed the revival to writer Gerry Conway, and later turned down an offer to ghost-write a few stories. The series ran 17 issues before its abrupt cancellation in the mid-1978 "DC Implosion" (needing to raise their 35-cent cover prices, DC decided to jump to 50 cents, adding eight pages of art and promoting it as the "DC Explosion." Three months later, DC's corporate parent, Warner Communications, ordered them to cut costs by canceling half their titles, losing the extra pages, and pricing the books at 40 cents). The remaining inventory of *All-Star* stories moved to the anthology *Adventure Comics*.

An important part of Earth-2 history, which Thomas would later expand upon, appeared in the anthology *DC Special 29*, Aug.–Sept. 1977. In “The Untold Origin of the Justice Society,” Paul Levitz wrote how, in 1940, Hitler had acquired the “Spear of Destiny,” the Roman centurion’s lance that had pierced Christ’s side at his crucifixion (this was years before the *Indiana Jones* movies featured similar relics in Nazi hands).⁷ With it, Hitler summoned a host of Valkyries and sent them to assassinate President Roosevelt. Mystic heroes, the Spectre and Dr. Fate, summoned American heroes to battle the Valkyries; they succeeded only when the Atom took a spear aimed at FDR. The heroes then decided to organize into the Justice Society.

*“We Did It Before and We Can Do It Again!”
The All-Stars Join the Battle*

Among the conditions offered to Roy Thomas upon his move to DC was that he would be in charge of Earth-2 continuity. Thomas had wanted to work with the Justice Society, but considering the recent cancellation of the series in *All-Star Comics*, he decided to revisit the Golden Age. Thomas later wrote, in his revived *Alter Ego* magazine:

Whereas at Marvel in the mid-'70s I'd had *The Invaders* commence some weeks after Pearl Harbor, I wanted to start *All-Star Squadron* on the night before the sneak attack, and provide the answer to what would have to be a real mystery to anyone who ever tried to take 1940's comic books seriously: Why the hell didn't America's super-heroes defend our base at Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941—or at least unleash a terrible vengeance on Japan a few hours or days later?

The War years had been a time of greatness as much as of infamy—of heroism as much as horror—and I wanted to turn the JSA loose in those green/Golden pastures.

No—not just the JSA.

All the fine young heroes of DC Comics [Autumn 2000].

By the end of 1941, DC had established dozens of characters that Thomas could draft into his new history. Quality Comics characters like Plastic Man, Blackhawk, and the heroes who would later become the Freedom Fighters, were drafted into service on Earth-2. Rights to the Fawcett characters were being renegotiated at the time, so Captain Marvel wouldn't appear for a few years. The membership for the All-Star Squadron were simple: every person who put on a costume to fight crime or evil was drafted into the Squadron under the direct command of President Roosevelt.

The All-Star Squadron was “teased” with a preview in *JLA 193* (August 1981). Its splash page featured Wonder Woman, Flash and Green Lantern in a charity race on December 6, 1941 (again, Thomas was writing a story to match an old comic cover — in this case, *Comic Cavalcade*). Afterward, they, and other members of the Justice Society were kidnapped, and this interlude set the stage for *All-Star Squadron 1* (September 1981). *All-Star Squadron's* debut demonstrated that the plotting would be much more complicated than on *The Invaders*. The three-issue story opened with Hawkman, Atom and Dr. Mid-Nite being summoned to the White House on the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack. President Roosevelt had also called in Plastic Man—here an FBI agent, to brief the heroes on their missing comrades. Also attending were non-JSA members Johnny Quick (a Flash clone), Liberty Belle and Robotman. FDR asked the group to mobilize an “All-Star Squadron” of every “mystery man” available to bolster the country's defense.

The abductor of the JSA members was Per Degaton, a time-traveling villain from 1947, who recruited foes of the JSA and brought them to 1941, before any of them had first met their nemeses, to abduct the heroes. With a fleet of museum-piece Zeros, he planned to fake a Japanese attack on the West Coast, forcing the U.S. to abandon its secret treaties to aid its European allies first and deplete its forces in the Pacific. This would allow Degaton to take over with weapons from the 1980s. The Squadron stopped the attack on California, freed the captive Justice Society, and defeated Degaton and his allies, which caused them to automatically return to their own times, taking the memory of their encounter with them.

The first *Squadron* narrative featured many elements that Thomas would employ throughout his run. Several of his stories involved complex time-travel paradoxes and jumps to other dimensions – the Quality hero Uncle Sam would twice recruit heroes, who happened to be Quality characters, to go to Earth-X where the Allies were nearing defeat. These threads did work out at first, as they helped Thomas' narrative for DC's history.

Thomas had resolved the "Home Front dilemma" in the Squadron's next adventure (4, Dec. 1981). The assembled All-Stars surveyed the devastation at Pearl Harbor, and vowed to exact revenge on the Japanese fleet. As the heroes flew into occupied seas, the narrative shifted to a villain named the Dragon King, who revealed that along with the Spear of Destiny, Hitler also had acquired the Holy Grail, and sent it to General Tojo. The two Axis leaders performed a rite on the artifacts, creating a mystic sphere of protection around their territory. Any hero who had magic powers – or was susceptible to magic, like Superman – and entered the sphere would be instantly converted to the Axis cause. Thus the most powerful members of the Squadron were required to stay at home, fighting spies and leading scrap paper drives.

The narrative touched on the Justice Society's adventures as reported in the original *All Star Comics*, then filled in what was going on with the Squadron in the meantime. In the weeks after Pearl Harbor, the Justice Society officially disbanded so its members could enlist in the military, under their civilian identities, echoing the "Justice Society Joins the War on Japan!" story from *All Star Comics* 11. With the JSA in the background (except for Hawkman, who Thomas kept active because he was the only JSA member to appear in every issue of *All Star Comics*), the All-Star Squadron established its reputation. They added Liberty Belle and Firebrand, the sister of the Quality character Firebrand, to their distaff numbers. The original Firebrand had been injured at Pearl Harbor. The All-Stars set up headquarters in the Perisphere of the New York World's Fair grounds. Thomas created an African-American hero, Amazing-Man, whose first adventure with the All-Stars placed them amidst the Detroit race riots of February, 1942 (38–39, Oct.–Nov. 1984).

With dozens of characters on every page of the series, it was hard to draw a bead on their personalities. Thomas later wrote that he had toyed with drawing up horoscopes for each character just to give him some traits to work with (*Alter Ego*, 2000). Unlike the hot-headed Human Torch or the arrogant Sub-Mariner, the DC heroes were at their best, always a swell bunch of guys. At their worst, they were bland. By creating a team with dozens of admitted second-string characters, Thomas differentiated between the group's "leaders" and "soldiers." For some characters, it was enough to rely on dialogue, as with Uncle Sam's Will Rogers-styled aphorisms, or the Shining Knight, a displaced member of King Arthur's court, who talked like Thor. Some of his regular characters had been allowed to advance in their personal lives; Johnny Quick and Liberty Belle got married in *All-Star Squadron* 50 (Oct. 1985). Not coincidentally, the happy couple matched powers and themes with the Liberty Legion's Whizzer and Miss America. The DC couple would have their own offspring, Jesse Quick, later the second generation Liberty Belle.

All-Star Squadron had been popular enough that Thomas was allowed to start another series set in the modern day. Rather than focus on the JSA at two different times in their history, he created *Infinity, Inc.* a team comprised of the JSA's junior members, former sidekicks, and hitherto unrevealed sons and daughters. The team tried to operate as a for-profit business, supporting their world-saving activities through work for hire. Some of the "Infinitors" later joined their parents in the current *Justice Society of America* series, giving the JSA its focus as the keepers of superhero "legacies." *Infinity, Inc.* was the first regular series drawn by Todd McFarlane, who would later create *Spawn*, a character he owned outright, to become the most successful independent creator in the comics field.

Thomas recycled some of his *Invaders* plots in *All-Star Squadron*. In 33 (May 1984), the Squadron visited the Japanese internment camps, fighting another young Japanese-American character, Tsunami, before convincing her she could better help her people as an ally. Captain Marvel finally entered the series when Hitler transported him from Earth-S and, as he had done to Thor in *Invaders*, brainwashed him into fighting Superman, Batman, and other heavyweights (36, Aug. 1984).

"Worlds Will Live! World Will Die!" Surviving the Crisis

Thomas' carefully reconstructed wartime history of Earth-2 was mostly accepted by both old-time and new fans. But it was suddenly and almost completely undone by the Crisis on Infinite Earths.

DC's management had become concerned that the plenitude of alternate Earths was too confusing for new readers. A decision was made, in 1982, to perform the first "reboot" of a comic book universe with *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. This was a twelve-issue series that started in 1985, after three years of clues dropped in almost every DC series. Heroes from Earths past, present and future (including several All-Star Squadron members) were gathered to fight the Anti-Monitor, who plotted to destroy the entire Multiverse, and remake it in his image.

By the time the "maxi-series" had ended, all of DC's Earths had merged into a single dimension. Earth-2 characters with direct Earth-1 counterparts, like Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, were erased from continuity, while Supergirl and the Silver Age Flash sacrificed their lives to save reality. Superman and Wonder Woman were started over with new origins in new, Number Ones of their respective titles.

Initially, plans were to reduce the infinite dimensions to just five, leaving *All-Star Squadron's* Earth-2 narrative intact. This was shown in the "Crisis Cross-Over," *All-Star Squadron* 50 (Oct. 1985), where the remaining Quality Comics heroes made the journey to Earth-X. While this story was in production, DC decided to end the Crisis with just one universe.

Thomas' Earth-2 continuity persisted for three more months, until *All-Star Squadron* 58–60 (June–Aug. 1986). This story arc, borrowing from the *Star Trek* episode "City on the Edge of Forever," involved Mekanique, a robot from the future. Mekanique helped some of the All-Stars save a young girl from being hit by a car, which would assure that her future history would come about. Mekanique was revealed to be the robot, Maria, from Fritz Lang's movie, *Metropolis*. Her presence in 1942 "held back" the full effects of the Crisis. Once Mekanique returned to the future, the Golden Age Superman, Batman and Robin, Wonder Woman and Aquaman disappeared.

All-Star Squadron continued for just six more months. Issue 64 (Dec. 1986) recycled “The Case of the Funny Paper Crimes” from *Superman 19* (Nov.–Dec. 1942), with the All-Stars taking Superman’s place in an attempt to re-canonize a Golden Age story. But the rest of the series was filled with various characters relating their origins, until ending with Issue 66 (January 1987). Thomas had also written a post-Crisis one-shot, *Last Days of the Justice Society* (1986), in which Hitler’s incantations over the Spear of Destiny caused the loosing of Ragnarok, the doomsday of Norse myth. Still mourning their dead from the *Crisis*, the surviving current-day JSA members went off to fight Ragnarok, in a battle to repeat through all eternity. This was to be the JSA’s final ending, at least until they were freed in another crossover series, 1992s *Armageddon: Inferno*.

Thomas was back five months later with *Young All-Stars*. This series opened in April, 1942, just a few days after *All-Star Squadron*’s narrative had ended. It brought together Tsunami and other obscure Golden Agers: Neptune Perkins, Dyna-Mite, Tigress, and the Sandman’s sidekick Sandy. Three new characters, Arn “Iron” Munro, Flying Fox, and Fury, were introduced to fill the continuity gap left by Earth-2’s Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, respectively. They most notably substituted for Superman and Wonder Woman in retelling a team-up that had first appeared in the oversized series *All-New Collector’s Edition* (C-54, 1978).

Young All-Stars was one of DC’s early “New Format” books. It was printed on better quality paper at a higher price, sold only at comic book retail stores, and not submitted for Comics Code Authority approval. Thomas would only sparingly venture into “adult” themes. Arn Munro and Fury would become romantically involved, until Arn discovered he had a venereal disease, and Fury learned from her namesakes, the Greek Eumenides, that she retained her powers only so long as she remained a virgin.

The Young All-Stars also went off on literary tangents. Arn Munro discovered that his father was Hugo Danner, the title character of Philip Wylie’s 1930 novel *The Gladiator*, one of the first stories about a “super-man.” Neptune Perkins’ grandfather was the “A. Gordon Pym” of Edgar Allen Poe’s narrative. And, in the last story in the series, Arn met the granddaughter of Prof. Edward Challenger from Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, taking a trip to that novel’s dinosaur-infested White Maple Land. Due either to declining sales or Thomas’ unhappiness with editorial mangling of his history, *Young All-Stars* ended with Issue 31 (Nov. 1989), in which the team was absorbed into the All-Star Squadron. As with *The Invaders*, Thomas’ wartime DC Comics’ narrative had ended in the middle of 1942.

Conclusions

As someone who had been a youngster during World War II, Thomas was probably the last of a generation who could muster any nostalgia for the wartime hero comic books. By the end of his run on *Young All-Stars*, there were fewer fans who could relate to his favorite comics from over 50 years earlier. Any treatment of a character from the childhoods of its writers would be too suffused with irony to stand on its own.

People reading Thomas’ body of writing today would be struck by the reliance on genre clichés and recurring plots. Heroes were constantly brainwashed into fighting for the Nazis, partly to maintain the Marvel tradition of heroes fighting each other at the drop of a hat. Many time-travel crossovers would end with the crossover guest returning home, and the

heroes losing all memory of the encounter. Many non-powered characters would gain their own super-powers, by hanging around long enough (e.g., Union Jack got clobbered by Thor's hammer and somehow gained electrical powers; the female Firebrand had flame powers her brother never had; and Liberty Belle got surges of super-strength whenever the real Liberty Bell was rung).

The villains in Thomas' series tended to rely heavily on the Evil Overlords handbook. Since many of the heroes were unarmed, and would surrender whenever the villain threatened innocent bystanders, a contrivance was needed to keep the heroes from being shot dead on the spot. This involved the villain exclaiming, "Wait! I have a better idea," discarding the least-powered member of the hero group as "no threat to my plans" and putting the rest into an Easily Escapable Death Trap™. Villains from Hitler down to Mr. Mind could be counted on to "monologue"⁸ for as many pages of exposition as was needed to fill in what had happened the issue before and to give the sidekick time to help the heroes escape.

Yet, for his faults, Thomas had carefully crafted a historical background for both of the major superhero comic publishers. His backstory for the Marvel Universe still informs current storylines. In a 1980 *Comics Journal* interview, *CA*'s then-artist John Byrne proclaimed, "Bless Roy Thomas for saying, 'Marvel Universe stories start with F[antastic] F[our] 1. Here are the Invaders stories. These took place too. Nothing else took place unless it fits and we say it does'" (Maynerd 73).

Most fans have preferred DC history as organized in *All-Star Squadron* to the complex mess left by later writers. Neither should today's comics fans forget Thomas' instrumental role in the birth of the fan movement, in trying to research comics history and scholarship, while preserving the sense of fun that drew kids to read comics in the first place.

Thomas would relinquish his editorial position at DC to write on a free-lance basis. He assisted his wife, Dannette, with her writing career, wrote mini-series and one-shot projects for Marvel and DC, and contributed introductions to reprint books of classic stories. He even returned to the sword-and-sorcery genre in 1997 by scripting the comics adaptation of *Xena: Warrior Princess*. In the 2000s, he revived his *Alter Ego* fanzine and compiled coffee-table book projects on Marvel history, like *The Marvel Vault* (2007) and *Amazing Marvel Universe* (2006).

If comic books by Roy Thomas and his contemporaries leaned heavily on their roots in World War II, they were by no means the only popular entertainments to do so. The war story has persisted as a motion picture genre. The heroes of the 1950s may have failed to find an audience as fighters against Communism, but this period was one of declining sales for all comics. A few war comics, set in Vietnam, were tried, but sales figures preferred the more distant perspectives of World War II heroes, Sgt. Rock and Sgt. Nick Fury.

The Invaders was by no means the only Golden Age comic revival; DC had been publishing *Shazam!*, starring the original Captain Marvel, which was illustrated at first by original artist C.C. Beck, since 1972. But concurrent with these clean-cut Golden Age heroics was the emergence of the "grim and gritty" hero. Before *The Invaders* debuted in 1975, the morally ambiguous Punisher and Wolverine had already bowed. The increasing popularity of these anti-heroes (joined by the assassin, Elektra, and Frank Miller's "Dark Knight" interpretation of Batman) indicated that dedicated comics fans preferred the darker, more cynical heroes who led the medium in the 1980s and 90s.

In his wartime comics, Captain America needed only to smile as he mowed down faceless Japanazis. With *The Invaders*, Thomas added depth and conflict to the character. *The*

Invaders served as a prequel to Cap as the “moral center” of Marvel’s superhero community. He rebuilt the Avengers, after its founding members departed, giving ex-villians Hawkeye, Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch a chance to make good. Cap partnered with the Falcon, Marvel’s first African-American hero, in 1969, and often gave up his commission, starting in the 1970s, over various government chicaneries. In the 1980s, Steve Rogers had a gay neighbor and a Jewish girlfriend, a supporting cast that would revolt his unreconstructed Nazi foes. By revisiting World War II from a contemporary perspective, Thomas was able to have Captain America face some of the more controversial aspects of wartime society, even if history showed he could have done little to change it. But the Captain America who witnessed the beginnings of the Holocaust and the internment of Japanese-Americans, in Thomas’ narratives, was the same Cap who would stand against the Super Human Registration Act in 2007’s *Civil War* event.

Notes

1. Cover copy from *Boy Commandos 2* (Spring, 1943) by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon (i), National Periodical Publications (DC Comics).
2. The twisted nomenclature of the publisher now known as Marvel Entertainment can be daunting to the casual reader. Fans generally refer to the comics of World War II as Timely Comics and the postwar period as Atlas, with *Fantastic Four 1* inaugurating the Age of Marvel Comics in 1961. Marvel merely followed standard business practice of using different pseudonymous publisher names for different titles. The *Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* lists 59 names used by the company that became Marvel in the introduction to its annual editions.
3. Today’s DC Comics was named National Periodical Publications in the 1940s. They were divided into two groups: Detective Comics (DC), home of the Superman and Batman titles; and All-American Comics, edited by M.C. Gaines, home of Wonder Woman, the Flash and others. The two shops’ were combined in 1944. National officially became DC Comics, Inc., in 1976.
4. Since Bucky’s body was never recovered back in 1945, his recent return as the Soviet agent Winter Soldier was one of the more plausible comic book resurrections. But Bucky-as-martyr served as an important aspect of Cap’s character for over 40 years. And no one had to make a deal with Mephisto or get retcon punched.
5. A bit more difficult to get out than the Timely-era Cap and Bucky’s usual cry of “Wahoo!” or “Yahoo!”
6. Steve Englehart previously reconciled the Captain America that fought the Red menace in the 1950s. In *CA 153–156* (Sept.–Dec. 1972), it was learned that an unnamed man had discovered the notes for the Nazi version of the Super-Soldier Formula. The U.S. government allowed him to play the role of Captain America, letting him undergo plastic surgery and assume Steve Rogers’ identity. He resurfaced in 1972, brainwashed into becoming the Neo-Nazi leader the Grand Director.
7. The best known of the many artifacts believed to be the Spear was in the Hofburg Museum in Vienna. After becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1938, the historical Hitler had ordered the Spear sent to Nuremberg. It was returned to Austria by General Patton.
8. Thanks to the Pixar movie *The Incredibles* for giving the perfect name to this plot device.

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History of the Marvel Zombies and Colonel America Among the Marvel Zombies

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On the surface Captain America seems to have played very little role in the *Marvel Zombies* franchise. On the alternate universe where Earth was destroyed by a zombie plague, Cap, here named “Colonel America,” was among the first heroes to be infected. Colonel America did not seem to retain much of his heroic characteristics as Earth’s former protectors ate every last person on the planet. At the end of the first *Marvel Zombies* miniseries, Zombie Colonel America is done in at the hands of his archenemy. Yet, in *Marvel Zombies 2*, the Colonel’s return, even in mere symbolic form, seems to be the catalyst to saving the last surviving humans in the universe.

Trying to analyze a series through the perspective of a minor character may seem like a fool’s errand. Especially when the series is an extended exercise in sick humor, intended to have little redeeming value besides entertaining the very dedicated Marvel fans, who bore the pejorative “Marvel zombie.” The author is reminded of Mark Twain’s caveat from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” Or in this case, eaten.

“Where’s Dr. Strange when you need him?” “Ate him.”
Son of Origins of Marvel Zombies

Since their debut in 2005, the Marvel Zombies have become one of Marvel’s most popular franchises¹. Each comic featuring the zombies went through several reprintings, followed by hardcover trade collections which themselves went through up to six reprints. Each new printing featuring new painted covers by Arthur Suydam, with a “zombified” send-up of a classic Marvel cover. Fans of the series have been well aware that collecting all 39-and-counting variant covers marks them as the same “Marvel zombies” being mocked by the series, just as *Star Trek* fans incorporated William Shatner’s “Get a Life” rant, from *Saturday Night Live* into their fanboy ethos.

Considering how open Marvel was to self-referential humor, especially in titles like *Not Brand Echh* and *What The—?!*, it seems odd that they did not make a play on the phrase “Marvel zombies” for the two or more decades of its currency. Marvel was similarly slow out of the gate when *Comics Buyer’s Guide* columnist Bob Ingersoll frequently derided Marvel’s use of

“teenage mutant ninjas” in 1984. Two fans, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, created a surprise cultural phenomenon by immediately spoofing the phrase in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. *TMNT* spurred dozens of meta-spoofs starring talking animals whose names seemed the result of a round of Mad Libs, including: *Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters*, *Pre-Teen Dirty Gene Kung-Fu Kangaroos*, and *Mildly Microwaved Pre-Pubescent Kung-Fu Gophers*. In 1989, long after the fad had peaked, Marvel finally offered the one-shot *Power Pachyderms* (originally advertised as *Adult Thermonuclear Samurai Elephants*).

Marvel had, of course, already featured a few zombies in its 70-year history. The cover feature of Atlas-era horror comic, *MENACE! 5* (July 1953) was “Zombie!” Written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Bill Everett, it was the story of the late Simon Garth, who had returned to life through voodoo as a traditional “revenant” zombie. The next year, Atlas signed on to the Comics Code Authority, which specifically forbade portraying zombies, ghouls, vampires and werewolves. The Code was revised in 1971 to allow the use of other monsters with a basis in classic literature, but not zombies. Roy Thomas revived Simon Garth in *Tales of the Zombie 1-10* (1973-75), a black and white magazine that was thus exempt from the Code.

Marvel used a bit of hoaxing to keep the *Zombies* a surprise when they debuted in 2005, unlike publishers today, who promote new comics in advance solicitations to retailers and fans through various news sites and magazines like *Wizard*. The idea is to pique enough interest to generate advance orders, without giving away too many plot details. This is difficult when magazines are solicited months in advance. Writer Mark Millar had created the *Zombies* for the *Fantastic Four* of the “Ultimates” imprint, wherein familiar Marvel characters were revised to be more accessible, without forty years of back-story. The *Ultimate Fantastic Four* got its powers from a teleportation accident, rather than from trying to beat the Russkies into outer space.

The success of the *Ultimates* line led to fan expectation of a crossover between its characters and the traditional 616² heroes. The solicitations for *Ultimate Fantastic Four 21* suggested this was where it would happen: its preview cover showed the younger and older Reed Richards’ looking at each other across a dimensional viewer, with the story arc’s title “Crossover” in the corner. The promotional copy read:

Marvel’s two universes collide. Meet the *Fantastic Eight*! Even in their short careers, the *Ultimate FF* have seen a lot of amazing things - but nothing will prepare them for the world they’re about to enter! Reed Richards has used his scientific genius to contact an Earth in a surprisingly familiar parallel dimension - and he’s ready to visit! [Goldstein].

When asked whether the story was the long-rumored 616-*Ultimates* crossover, scripter Mark Millar, returning to the title he launched after a run of stories by Warren Ellis, provided noncommittal answers:

Again, I’m saying as little as possible, but what happens is that Reed starts getting emails from another dimension with a warning of an impending crisis. Details of how they can open a bridge between these two universes are quickly conceived and then much madness ensues.

Would a crossover between the *Ultimate* and *Marvel Universe* really be that bad? Nobody complained when the *Justice League* met the *Justice Society*. Just sit back and enjoy the story [Brady].

The online preview showed only the first few pages of the issue, in which, the *Ultimate FF* stop a gang of time-traveling terrorists from killing the first animal to emerge from the ocean. The team returns to the present day and gets chewed out by Captain America and the *Ultimates*, who that universe’s version of the *Avengers*.

Only when the printed book came out did we find the advertised crossover. Reed is shown to have been corresponding with his counterpart in an alternate universe, who appeared to him, and the reader, to be the Reed Richards of Earth-616. Ultimate Reed has completed a dimensional transporter that allows him to pay a social call. But when he transports, Reed finds himself in the basement of a wrecked building, strewn with skeletons and half-eaten corpses, in a devastated New York City. The issue ends with him encountering the Zombie Fantastic Four, and Zombie Reed telling him (and the reader) “Ever get the feeling you’ve been had?” (Millar 25)

Ultimate FF 22 showed, in flashback, a flash of lightning and a zombie Sentry from yet another universe, falling into Manhattan. The use of Robert Reynolds, the Sentry, as the carrier of the zombie plague added further to the “Crossover” hoax: Sentry’s debut mini-series, in 2000, promoted him as a previously unpublished pre-Marvel hero, created by Stan Lee (controversially, *Wizard* and Newsarama.com reported the hoax as fact).³

Zombie Reed’s narration explained, “They said it all started with a flash in the sky and a ripple through the clouds. Nobody knows what caused this, exactly, but some people think it might have been a punch.”⁴ Colonel America and the Avengers were first on the scene investigating, and he, with Ms. Marvel and Hawkeye, were first to be attacked and infected by Sentry. “Within 24 hours, we’d consumed the entire planet” (Millar 3). One panel on this page shows Richards being infected by Colonel America himself, a narrative that was altered in the *Dead Days* one-shot.

Ultimate Reed flees the Zombie FF, but is attacked by a group of zombie heroes, including Colonel America. He is rescued by an uninfected Magneto.

In Issue 23, Magneto tells Reed that, ironically, he had been sheltering three human survivors in a subway tunnel. The two realize that Zombie Reed had enticed Ultimate Reed to build the dimensional gateway so the “infected” could invade a new world — sure enough, at that moment, the Zombie FF had crossed over, and were attacking the rest of the Ultimate FF. The survivors determine they need to get to the Baxter Building, escape to Ultimate Earth, and destroy the gateway. Their fight, through a phalanx of zombies, was aided by the arrival of Ultimate Sue, Johnny, and Ben, who had imprisoned the zombie team and figured out where their Reed had gone. The heroes and survivors fight their way to the Baxter Building, where Magneto volunteers to stay behind and destroy the gateway.

The introduction of the Marvel Zombies was handled rather carefully, perhaps in case of a backlash against comic book icons being portrayed as undead cannibals. The word “zombie” was not even used in “Crossover,” but did appear in a “Previously in *Ultimate Fantastic Four*” summary in Issue 23 (Millar 1). No one was shown being eaten or even bitten.

“Colonel” America did not get much play in this story, except for the implication that he was the first to be infected by the Zombie Sentry, and the online preview pages for *UFF 22* still referred to him as “Captain America.” This may have been intended to suggest to previewing readers that “Crossover” actually took place on mainstream Marvel Earth, or it may have been a last-minute change, to establish a point of divergence for the Zombie universe.

“At least you had the Amazing Friends for an amazing breakfast!” *Marvel Zombies summary.*

1. *Marvel Zombies (2006)*

While the “Crossover” arc in *Ultimate Fantastic Four* was still coming out, Marvel announced that Robert Kirkman would write a spin-off *Marvel Zombies* mini-series. His credentials for this franchise was his most popular title, up to then, *The Walking Dead*, begun in 2003. This ongoing series was set in the “Zombie Apocalypse” genre, with bands of human survivors fighting off familiar, slow moving, insatiable zombies. Kirkman had also written several Marvel books, and was at the time the regular writer of *Marvel Team-Up*. He had also written a *CA 28* story for the 2002 series, which was a tie-in to the “Avengers Disassembled” crossover event, published in 2004.

Marvel Zombies 1 featured a painted cover by Arthur Suydam, on which a Zombie Spider-Man was web-slinging with a victim, an homage to *Amazing Fantasy 15*. The series picked up where the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* story ended, with Magneto at the destroyed gateway to the Ultimate Universe. He is surrounded by Colonel America and a dozen other zombies. The Colonel makes perhaps his only characteristic speech, saying, “I know you’re not looking forward to being devoured, but I give you my word — if you surrender, I’ll make sure you die painlessly first” (Kirkman 2). As Magneto attempts to fly away, the Colonel grabs his leg. Magneto notes, “Oh good. You brought the shield,” as his magnetic powers grab the shield to neatly slice off the top of the Colonel’s skull. Colonel America still has enough faculties to shout, “Look at what the punk did to me! If we catch him — when we catch him — I get double rations!” (5). The Colonel only gets the shield back after Magneto uses it to fully decapitate Zombie Hawkeye.

Momentarily in hiding, Magneto receives a radio communication from Fabian Cortez, reporting that his Acolytes, and other uninfected mutants, are safely at his orbital stronghold, Asteroid M. But before he can join them, Magneto is bitten by the Wasp, then consumed by the zombies in a full of page of teeth pulling at entrails.

Actually, this scene was repeated only a few times in the franchise because there were so few people left to eat. Despite the shock value of its subject, the sequences were actually subdued compared to movies in the zombie genre.

Once they’ve eaten, the zombies have a few moments of lucidity to ponder their situations. Spider-Man goes into his guilt spiel about having eaten his wife and aunt; Zombie Hulk reverts to Bruce Banner (he now Hulks out when he’s hungry); and Magneto’s leg bursts his stomach. Colonel America catches up with the gang, holding some of his grey matter in his hand, suggesting that they don’t even need all of their brains to keep functioning. As the zombies discuss whether they’ll just go hungry from now on, Power Man spots the Silver Surfer in the sky.

In issue 2, the Surfer flew off before the other zombies could see him. Colonel America decides they could spend their time looking for any pockets of civilians. Splitting from the group, Giant Man (Hank Pym) goes to his lab, where he has hidden the uninfected, sedated Black Panther, snacking on bits of his limbs to keep his head clear. The Wasp discovers her husband’s secret, and in the ensuing fight, he bites her head off, spitting it out to reinforce the fact that zombies can’t stand the taste of zombie flesh.

Meanwhile, Zombie Iron Man and the Colonel rejoined a crowd of zombie heroes in Times Square. As the zombies ponder ways to scout out humans that might still be in hiding, discussion reveals that Colonel America had been president of the United States. He mentions that he “didn’t serve a full term,” (Kirkman 19) and he was not made privy to any secret bases where government or military officials might have hidden. The Silver Surfer returns to announce that Galactus is coming to eat the planet, and the zombies who can fly try to attack the Surfer.

Issue 3 starts with the Surfer’s Power Cosmic slicing Iron Man in half. Zombie Thor manages to knock the Surfer off his board, where the Colonel leads a ground-based zombie attack, shouting “Get him!! Keep him off balance — don’t give him a chance to devise a strategy against us!” (Kirkman 5). The battle ends when the Zombie Hulk bites off the Surfer’s head. Only he, Colonel America, Spider-Man, Giant Man, Power Man, Iron Man and Wolverine get to eat what’s under the Surfer’s outer shell, which endows them with shares of his Power Cosmic. They immediately turn on the other zombies to see if they’ll taste any better “crispy fried.”

Black Panther is hobbling through the streets, after escaping Giant Man’s lab. He’s carrying the Wasp’s head, which can still talk and beg T’Challa for a taste of his flesh. The two are met by the Acolytes, trying to find Magneto. After the standard fight between Marvel characters upon first meeting, the Acolytes reluctantly agree to take Panther and the Wasp’s head to Asteroid M.

The seven cosmically-powered zombies have killed most of the remaining zombies and discuss their next move, but are interrupted by Galactus, who announces his intent to eat this planet, but first, has anybody seen his herald?

The zombies attack Galactus in Issue 4, but are easily repulsed. Here, Giant Man takes what should have been Colonel America’s line: “We’ll find a way to defeat him!” (Kirkman 4). The zombies give up the attack, the Colonel noting that Galactus didn’t pursue them because “We stopped being worthy of his attention the second we stopped trying to prevent him from achieving his goal” (7). The zombies gather at Hank Pym’s lab to assemble an amplifier for their newfound powers, and a few days later, they return to Times Square to find a cadre of zombie villains attacking Galactus.

In Issue 5, The zombie “heroes” pool their stolen Power Cosmic into their amplifier, and are actually able to bring Galactus down. But first they have to fight through the zombie villains, including Venom, the Super Skrull and Doctor Doom. The zombies have an easy time dispatching their enemies with the Surfer’s powers, but Colonel America is surprised to find the Zombie Red Skull putting up a fight: “You never could hope to best me in a physical fight—what makes you even try? Has the hunger consumed you that much? Is your judgment that clouded?”

But as the Colonel’s shield chops off the Skull’s left arm, the villain retorts: “You need me to spell it out for you? You’ve never had such an obvious weakness before!” (9).

And with his right arm, the Skull scoops out the last of Colonel America’s brain. Zombie Spider-Man blasts the Skull’s head off, which, lying on the pavement, gloats “So worth it — all of it... Just for this,” before it’s squished by Giant Man (Kirkman 10). Galactus still rises to warn the zombies that they will regret their actions, but they instead set on him, crack open his armor and devour the World-Devourer.

The narrative shifts to “Five Years Later,” and Asteroid M setting down in the remains of New York City. The Acolytes debark, accompanied by Black Panther, sporting Forge’s cybernetic limb replacements, his wife Lisa, and their infant son K’Shamba. The Zombie Wasp’s head, fitted to a cyborg body, confirms that there is no sign of the zombies on Earth.

On another planet, an alien ruler is informed that “The Galactus comes,” the dire calamity that destroyed other, nearby worlds is now imminent. In the night skies above, Zombie Spider-Man, Giant Man, Hulk, Wolverine, Power Man and Iron Man appear, wearing their own versions of Galactus’ armor, with Giant Man announcing, “It’s feeding time, boys!” (21)

“Frightful,” *Ultimate Fantastic Four* (2006)

One month after *Marvel Zombies* concluded, Mark Millar’s *Ultimate Fantastic Four* began a story arc with the imprisoned Zombie FF, now calling themselves the “Frightful Four,” after old nemeses of the original FF. Ultimate Johnny Storm is discovered to have a Lovecraftian creature, that would destroy the Earth if it hatched, gestating in his body. Reed, Sue and Ben go hat in hand to ask for Doctor Doom’s help, but in their absence the Zombie quartet breaks out of confinement, and dines on several Baxter Building staffers. They get to the dimensional gateway, intending to bring their zombie friends to the Ultimate universe, but are halted by Doom, who had exorcised the creature from Johnny’s body, but by mispronouncing the Atlantean incantations, failed to kill it. Doom salves his wounded pride by incapacitating the zombies, then sacrifices himself, by personally escorting creature and zombies to the Zombie-verse. Doom arrives at the moment the zombies are picking Galactus’ bones, his last words as they turn to attack him are “Hmph. Well, this should be a challenge.” (22-23).

“Eat the Neighbors” (2006)

In the months before the next *Zombies* story, Marvel published a hardbound collection of the first *Marvel Zombies* series, aimed at fans who forego the tedium of collecting monthly comics and “wait for the trades.” One advertisement for the book, in *Wizard 180* (Oct. 2006), was a parody of the many one-page ads for Hostess snack foods that starred Marvel and DC characters, during the 1970s. Titled “Eat the Neighbors,” the comic starred Zombie Colonel America, Iron Man and Spider-Man searching for victims. Responding to Spider-Man’s complaining, Colonel America says: “Quiet, Zombie Spider-Man! At least you had the Amazing Friends for an amazing breakfast! Zombie Iron Man and I had to share Puck, so we’re still starv — Eh?” The zombies find a little boy and girl, who think they’ve been rescued. Instead, the heroes eat them as “Hostees Meat Pies.”

***Marvel Zombies/Army of Darkness* (2007)**

The next *Zombie* project was an inter-company crossover, with Dynamite Entertainment’s licensed comics, starring Ashley J. Williams, the zombie-fighting hero of Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead/Army of Darkness* movies. Writer John Layman filled in the details of the day the *Zombie* plague struck. The series opens with Ash falling through a dimensional rift, similar to *Zombie Sentry*’s arrival, but landing in a Dumpster. A homeless woman, possessed by the *Necronomicon*, warns him that, “This world will die and an army of the dead shall rise” (Layman 6).

Ash finds a *Daily Bugle*, and figuring out that this world is full of comic-book heroes, he seeks help, by going straight to the top: the Avengers. Ash’s attempt to convey the gravity of the situation isn’t helped by his rudeness, so the Avengers brush off his warning, and

the Scarlet Witch transports him to a pond in Central Park — just as a pink lightning bolt rips through the skies. Ash makes it to the impact site just ahead of the Avengers, and Spider-Man swings by to offer a hand. Colonel America asks him to get Ash out of the area, and Ash warns Spidey that he had just come to this dimension from the afterlife, where some of the souls lined up before the Pearly Gates were attacked, and eaten, by Zombie Sentry. Ash shot Sentry with his “broomstick,” but the zombie just knocked into the 2149 Universe. When Spidey and Ash return to the scene, they find that Colonel America, Hawkeye, Black Widow and Power Man are already infected, and have immediately begun eating human prey. Still wrapped up in webbing and convinced these zombies are the “Deadites” he fought before, Ash convinces Spider-Man that their only hope lies in him locating this universe’s copy of the Necronomicon. But Spidey is attacked and infected by Zombie Colonel America, and Spider-Man drops Ash, who this time misses a Dumpster and is set upon by some hungry zombie Avengers.

In Issue 2 of the new series, still in control of his faculties, Spider-Man bluffs the zombie Avengers by threatening to eat Hawkeye’s brain, and claiming Ash for himself. Zombie Colonel America declares, “We might need Clint (Hawkeye) later. And we’re still a team, even if our priorities have changed. Go for it, Spidey. You want to dine on jackass tartare and not share ... be our guest.” (Layman 5) The last panel on that page shows the Colonel wishing Spidey “Bon Appetit.” One Wikipedia contributor claimed the Colonel’s pose, in this panel, was a parody of the gung-ho Ultimate Captain America’s quote, “You think this letter on my head stands for *France*?” in *Ultimates 12* (“Alternate Versions” 2003). When last seen, in this issue, the Zombie Colonel is cutting a victim in half with his shield, Black Widow is snacking on a poodle, and Spider-Man leaves Ash to check on Aunt May and Mary Jane. Ash, who saves Dazzler from Zombie Winter Soldier, figures Doctor Strange is likely to have a Necronomicon.

In Issue 3, Ash and Dazzler are joined by the uninfected Scarlet Witch, who tells them that the Zombie Colonel had called an Avengers alert so they could infect the rest of the roster. With Dr. Strange aboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier, the three enter his library, where Ash interrogates some of the talking books, and learns the Necronomicon is actually held by Doctor Doom.

In Issue 4, the zombie plague spreads out of control, when Quicksilver is infected by the shape-shifter Mystique, posing as his sister the Scarlet Witch. Zombie Quicksilver speeds around the world, infecting heroes in Britain, Russia, Japan, and even the Savage Land. Meanwhile, Ash and his companions take an Avengers quinjet to Latveria, which is besieged by Zombie Goliath (Bill Foster). Ash’s attitude quickly gets him banished to a dungeon. Doctor Doom has determined the zombie plague is extra dimensional in nature, not supernatural. Ash escapes his lockup and finds Doom’s library and the Necronomicon. The talking book confirms that it had nothing to do with the zombie plague; it just sent a warning to Ash to screw with him. The Necronomicon taunts him by paraphrasing Mary Jane Watson: “Face it, tiger... you crapped out!” (Layman 19).

In Issue 5, the zombies have apparently finished off the rest of the Earth, and Colonel America leads their massed attack on Doomstadt. Ash coerces the Necronomicon into re-animating the people killed, as Deadites, creating the prophesied Army of the Dead to fight the plague zombies. The resulting battle buys Doom, who is already infected, enough time to transport the surviving Latverians to another dimension. Doom allows Ash to escape before destroying the gateway, and Ash makes it to a new universe, where he finds Marvel Werewolves just finishing up Galactus’ carcass.

Marvel Zombies: Dead Days (2007)

While the *MZ/AoD* miniseries was being published, Marvel also issued a one-shot *Dead Days* comic (July 2007) that filled in events in the *Army of Darkness* crossover, without directly referring to it.⁵ Written again by Kirkman, it opened with the just-infected Spider-Man getting to his apartment, where the zombie virus finally overpowers him, and he eats Mary Jane and Aunt May. The narrative then shifts to Asteroid M, where Magneto's dialogue with Fabian Cortez reveals that they were tricked into allowing the zombie plague into their universe by someone offering them a deal, to "thin out homo sapiens — to give mutants a fighting chance" (Kirkman 5). Instead, the zombies are killing humans and mutants alike.

In this story, Colonel America shows some of his leadership abilities. After the Avengers have eaten a few hundred New Yorkers, he calls them to attention, to help them recognize that the gnawing hunger subsides after they've eaten, and that this is their chance to get back to Avengers Mansion, to try to figure a way out of their predicament.

At the Baxter Building, Zombie She-Hulk bypassed the Fantastic Four's security codes to get in, and eat the Richards' children before the Invisible Girl could destroy her. The FF take their Fantasticar to the S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier, where Nick Fury addresses the struggling resistance. He notes that "only metahumans are affected — but that may just be because us normal humans are being completely eaten and can't fight off these monsters" (Kirkman 18).

Having stashed Black Panther in his lab to eat later, Zombie Giant Man arrives at Avengers Mansion to find the Colonel and the rest of the team at least saved him a piece of Jarvis. Hank Pym is the one who is most upset at the idea that this may be their lot, and that their world is dying.

Aboard the Helicarrier, Reed Richards examines the zombie virus, and finds himself starting to think of the zombies as an improvement: "They use far less energy — most bodily functions are shut down — not necessary any longer — yet they still retain mobility and all of their intellect. Yet little more than their brain is actually functioning. It's really quite fascinating" (24). Meantime, Tony Stark has starting working on a dimensional gateway to evacuate any survivors.

A double-page melee has Zombie Colonel America, down on the ground, explaining to Thor, "You don't understand — we *tried* to fight this — we *did* — but we just *can't!* This is what we are now! There is *nothing* we can do! (27)"

Aboard the Helicarrier, Reed calls the rest of the FF to the lab and claims that the zombie virus is not a plague, it's evolution. Reed infected the rest of his team as they entered, so he could experience, firsthand, being infected by them in turn. The Zombie FF find Tony Stark has almost completed his dimensional gateway, and decide that finding a new world to eat is a great idea. So, instead of eating the non-superpowered Tony, they infect him. Escaping to the room with the gateway, Nick Fury has Thor smash the mechanism, before the FF can break in. The Zombie FF infect the rest of the heroes in the room, but eat Fury as punishment. Zombie Reed decides to take the broken machine to the Baxter Building and try to fix it so they can reach another world to feed on, setting the stage for the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* arc.

Black Panther (2007)

The next zombie story involved characters from the mainstream Marvel Universe. *Black Panther 27-30* (June–Sept 2007), takes place just after the *Civil War* crossover event. Reed

and Sue have taken a leave of absence from the Fantastic Four, and given temporary membership to T'Challa and his new bride, Storm, of the X-Men. Fighting a monster bug from the Negative Zone, the Panther chances using two magic talismans, the Solomon Frogs, to send it back. Instead, the bug *and* the FF are sent to a Skrull planet, in the Zombie Universe ... and the Galacti zombies are just arriving.

In true Marvel style, the Galacti have been bickering amongst themselves, and making bad jokes, while attacking (e.g., in *Black Panther* 28, "Hulk say: *Get in Hulk's belly!!!*") (Hudlin 20) The FF ally with the Skrulls to fight the zombies.

The zombies figure this group of humans must have some device they could use to invade a new universe of humans. However the 616-FF barely escape, as the Galacti also learn, after eating all the Skrulls, that they can get some roughage by pooling their Galactus energy to eat the whole planet.

Marvel Zombies 2 (2007-2008)

Marvel Zombies 2 1 opens with the Zombie Galacti at "the edge of the known universe," where Giant Man proclaims, "I can't believe we ate the whole thing!" (Kirkman 2). It is forty years later, and the Galacti have zombie-fied other beings for company, including, Thanos, Phoenix, Firelord (a later herald of Galactus), and Gladiator of the Shi'ar Imperial Guard. Having finished off the entire universe, the zombies start arguing, and Zombie Thanos learns, too late, that one should never get the Hulk mad, zombie or no. Iron Man recalls the dimensional gateway, so the Zombies decide to go back to Earth, and fix it. Setting off on the long journey, with a rest stop to eat Ego, the Living Planet, some of the zombies notice that, as they go without feeding for long periods, the hunger seems to fade.

On Earth, Black Panther's grandson is exploring the wreckage of Manhattan. He stumbles upon Zombie Hawkeye's head; still "alive," but mad from years of isolation, and no longer hungry. He takes Hawkeye to New Wakanda, the Acolytes' settlement carved out of Asteroid M. An aging Black Panther is its leader. All is not well; the children of the Acolytes are threatening to take control, and the Wasp, her head fitted to a newer cyborg body, prevails upon T'Challa to help Hawkeye, by having his head attached to her first cyborg body. Fabian Cortez' son, Malcolm, uses the harboring of the zombies to rally the Acolytes in a call for new leadership. That night, T'Challa is attacked in bed and mortally wounded by an Acolyte assassin. The Wasp saves him in the only way possible, by biting Black Panther and making him a zombie.

In *Issue 2*, Zombies Panther and Wasp are locked in isolation; it seems the cure for zombie hunger is simply going cold turkey for a few weeks. Malcolm Cortez, who had sent the assassin after T'Challa, seizes the opportunity to take over New Wakanda, and agitates to have the remaining zombies destroyed. A confrontation with Cortez is interrupted by the arrival of the Galacti. Hulk starts grabbing and eating but is restrained by Zombie Giant Man, who considers the idea of a captive breeding program. Zombie Spider-Man, now stricken by conscience, fires a Galactus energy bolt that takes off part of Giant Man's skull, at the same angle that Colonel America was stricken. The zombies choose up sides, and have it out, Marvel style. Zombie Panther leads the fight to the edge of the colony, where a force field is put up to keep out the Galacti who are in favor of eating everyone immediately — all except Gladiator.

In *Issue 3*, Zombies Spider-Man, Power Man and the Wasp take a severe beating from Zombie Gladiator, until he is brought down by Forge, who is wearing a modified version of Iron Man's original armor. The other Galacti give up the fight and head for the Baxter Building. While the zombie defenders of New Wakanda are being literally sewn back together, Forge reveals that he took the gateway device from the Baxter Building years ago, knowing the Galacti would come back for it. Robert Reynolds (an aged non-powered Sentry of this universe) reveals that, some years back, an expedition had found viable pieces of zombie brain tissue. After Black Panther's son T'Channa had died, Reynolds and Forge secretly experimented, placing the gray matter in T'Channa's body, and finding it was the remains of Colonel America's brain. T'Channa, now zombiefied, wears a Colonel America uniform, but is capable only of uttering war comic clichés.

In *Issue 4*, the Zombie Spider-Man and Power Man react to the Zombie Colonel as if he were the real thing, trying to break up a fight with the angered Black Panther. When the Zombie Galacti arrive, the defenders temporarily lower their shielding to confront them outside, but Zombie Iron Man slips in. Even he is taken aback by what appears to be the Colonel, among the human survivors. But when Zombie Bruce Banner awakens from sedation, and slips his restraints, he accidentally lowers the shielding, letting the Galacti inside. Zombie Giant Man grabs one of the humans, then realizes he too is no longer hungry.

In *Issue 5*, all the Galacti realize they've lost their appetites, and decide to spare the human survivors. Cortez is unwilling to forgive, but that discussion is interrupted by a very hungry Zombie Hulk. He quickly destroys Zombie Phoenix and Iron Man, while Colonel America attacks, shouting "The bigger they are, the harder they fall," and "United we stand!" (Kirkman 10, 12). Reynolds offers to let the Hulk eat him, so he'll revert to Bruce Banner, and the survivors can destroy him.

Three weeks later, the remaining zombies have buried their comrades, and helped rebuild New Wakanda. Cortez meets with the zombies around the dimensional gateway, and reveals that it worked fine, he had been sabotaging it all this time. Now he uses the gateway to send the last of the zombies to another dimension where they will be someone else's problem.

Two other Zombie-related projects could not yet be referenced by the author: (1) the 2006, one-shot *Ultimate Civil War Spider-Ham Crisis* featured the funny-animal character, Peter Porker, the Spectacular Spider-Ham. Going on a quest to find who stole all the Marvel characters' thought balloons, and replaced them with captions, Spider-Ham crosses into the Zombie-verse, and becomes "Undead Ham," and (2) *Marvel Zombies The Book of Angels, Demons & Various Monstrosities* was a 2007 extension of the *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe* line with a few pages of text summarizing the *Marvel Zombies* storyline.

Marvel has announced a third *Marvel Zombies* mini-series for later in 2008. The new series would involve some of the zombies left on Earth after the Galacti departed, crossing over into the mainstream 616 Marvel Universe (Rogers).

Marvel Zombies in Zombie Lore

The flesh-eating zombie is a relatively recent addition to the horror movie pantheon. George A. Romero first conflated the soulless shambling zombie of voodoo lore, with flesh-eating ghouls, in 1968's *Night of the Living Dead* — in fact, in that movie, his monsters were called "ghouls." While zombie films offer the chance to show some of the most gruesome scenes possible in a movie, they also have comedic potential; witness the dazed zombies wandering

a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead*, the slacker attitude of Shaun of the Dead, or the gore humor of Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive*.

Mark Millar's alterations to the zombie formula established similarities to Dan O'Bannon's *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). Both sets of zombies retained their personalities, could talk, and retained their physical abilities as long as decomposition would allow. And it required much more than a blow to the brain to stop them. This setup allowed Kirkman to create similar scenes of sick humor, such as Daredevil, and later Black Panther, contemplating the gaping holes where their hearts and lungs used to be, *a la* Al Capp's Fearless Fosdick.

While the *Ultimate Fantastic Four* stories hinted at it, *Marvel Zombies* depicted all its characters in their "classic," mostly 1970s, incarnations. The Hulk is still the purple-pantsed "Hulk Smash!" monster we know and love, and Tony Stark's downfall is that he still carries his Iron Man armor in his briefcase. Both Captain Marvels are in evidence: the Kree warrior and the African-American woman who took his name after Mar-vell's death. The Silver Surfer is Galactus' herald, yet the zombie Galacti of series 2 are joined by Firelord, a later herald. In *MZ/AoD*, Ashley Williams saves Dazzler, in her disco-era outfit, from the more recent Zombie Winter Solider. Luke Cage still wears his Blaxploitation style Power Man outfit, with the chest-baring yellow shirt and tiara.

Captain/Colonel America in the Zombie Universe

While the Colonel still played a key role in what would become the *Zombie Universe*, the underlying theme suggests that this universe "fell" partly because of superhero hubris. Ultimate Reed Richards started the whole franchise by sneaking off to a seemingly normal parallel world, unmindful of possible consequences. *Zombie Universe* Reed, driven mad by the death of his children, decides the zombie virus is a part of humanity's evolution, and infects the surviving heroes in the Helicarrier. In the "Frightful" story arc, Ultimate Doctor Doom miscalculated when dealing with the parasite in Johnny Storm's body, and had to accompany the *Zombie FF* and the parasite to the *Zombie Universe* to rectify his error. The *Zombie Universe*'s Doctor Doom suffered similar reversals, trying to keep the zombies from his castle, no thanks to Ash' bungling and thinking with an organ other than his brain. As Ultimate Reed was suckered, so was the *Zombie-verse* Magneto suckered into bringing the plague to his Earth, on the pretext of aiding his mutant cause.

Colonel America, meanwhile, played his good soldier role, by leading the Avengers to investigate the original incident in Manhattan, and, as a result, was the first to fall to the zombie plague. Perhaps this is another example of hubris, the Colonel's unshakable certainty that there was no problem he couldn't handle. This pointed out a fundamental flaw in the character's makeup. As "America's Super Soldier," his strength lay in improvising defensive countermeasures. He was rarely one for long-range planning, or for directing operations. Despite being one of the founders of the Marvel hero community, Cap still led the front lines while Marvel's "Illuminati" tried to control the damage from bad decision-making.

Colonel America also appears to have been the fulcrum that differentiated the *Zombie-verse* from the 616 Universe. Aside from its characters existing in their "classic" versions, the major deviation seems to be Colonel America, who had briefly served as president of the United States. The story is unclear whether the Colonel was president when the zombie plague struck, or perhaps his election was an alternate ending to the story in *CA 250* (Oct.

1980), in which Cap was urged to consider, but ultimately decided against running for President. Perhaps a commentator with military experience could address whether a “Captain” in the army represents an accomplished field commander, while a full-bird “Colonel” is more of an administrator.

It may seem a stretch to suggest that the zombies in *Marvel Zombies 2* seemed lost without Colonel America in their midst as a rudder. Yet on their way back to Earth, the zombies bickered, in the usual Marvel way. After the attempt to penetrate the shield around New Wakanda proved to be too much effort, the Galacti just gave up and headed to the Baxter Building. So it was not in a vacuum that the Galacti were stopped short, however briefly, by the sight of a figure twice Colonel America’s size, wearing a mock-up of the Colonel’s costume.

With *Marvel Zombies*’ array of zombie homage covers, and the many other homages, planted like Easter Eggs throughout the artwork, it may not seem a stretch to suggest that T’Channa, with Colonel America’s brain tissue, and a modified Cap costume, was intended to resemble Isaiah Bradley, the wartime “black Captain America,” from the 2003 miniseries “*Truth: Red, White & Black*.” It is worth noting that an alternate timeline story, in *CA 28 vol. 4* (Oct. 2004) has Isaiah Bradley as President in the year 2026.

When T’Channa attacks his father T’Challa, Zombie Spider-Man and Power Man try to restrain him, with Spider-Man shouting “Colonel — Don’t you remember us?” (Kirkman *MZ2 4 5*). Even Iron Man, leading the zombie faction determined to eat the last people in the universe, stops abruptly when he sees the ersatz Colonel. It could be argued that the sight of the undead heroes’ moral leader, however degraded from the original, provided the few seconds it took for the zombies to change their minds and work with the survivors.

Marvel has killed and resuscitated Captain America so many times that very few fans doubt that Steve Rogers will return by *CA 50 Vol. 5*. But in several stories dealing with Cap’s “permanent” death in the future, or in alternate times, his impact on his world is most keenly felt. The 2007 miniseries *Captain America: The Chosen*, had a dying Cap passing his will and fighting spirit on to hundreds of soldiers, firefighters, teachers, and other ordinary humans who make a difference in their world. Alex Ross and Jim Kruger’s *Earth X* trilogy (1999–2003), had Cap dying to safeguard the rebirth of Mar-Vell as humanity’s savior, and reincarnated with other deceased heroes in *Paradise X* as the “Avenging Host,” charged with bringing souls into a new paradise created in the Negative Zone (writer Jim Kruger had also intended Cap to end up at the throne of this paradise, but the series was cut short due to declining sales). Marvel has also published stories that detailed possible endings for the entire Marvel Universe, at the hand of Thanos, Galactus, or Fred Hamebeck. Despite the gore and sick humor of the *Marvel Zombies* franchise, Colonel America, is able to save his universe and provide some slight form of redemption for his zombie cohort.

Notes

1. First printings of each *Marvel Zombies* title regularly placed in the top 30 of Diamond Comic Distributors’ monthly comic sales estimates, as calculated at www.cbgsxtra.com. The peak was 92,000 copies for *Marvel Zombies 2 1*. The Zombie stories in *Ultimate Fantastic Four* drew in *Zombie* fans and *UFF* fans to sell 102,500 copies of *UFF 30*. Add to that revenue from T-shirts, licensed action figures and MiniMates toys.

2. As more comics involved alternate realities, Marvel began numbering its universes, sometimes based on the year or issue number in which that universe debuted. The traditional Marvel Universe is Earth-616, for the date of *Fantastic Four 1*. The Ultimates universe is Earth-1610; the *Marvel Zombies* depopulated Earth-2149.

The numbering scheme was revealed in the 2005 *Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe: Alternate Universes*. This essay will identify the characters involved as “616” or “Mainstream,” “Ultimate,” and “Zombie.”

3. This was the comic book equivalent of the Blair Witch Project or other similar mockumentaries presenting the fictional content as fact.

4. This narration seems like a dig at the “Superboy Retcon Punches” that precipitated DC’s *Infinite Crisis*, but that series started two months after *Ultimate Fantastic Four 22* appeared. References to the Retcon Punch flooded fan discussion boards after *Batman Annual 25* (May 2006) explained how it brought Jason Todd back to life. Additionally, some forum posts claimed Kirkman intended for Superman to be the carrier of the plague, as Sentry was Marvel’s Superman analogue.

5. Besides a chance to sell more popular comics, this may have been done as a safeguard against losing the rights to reprint or refer to *Army of Darkness*, being a crossover with a licensed movie property. When Marvel published *Marvel Zombies: The Covers* in 2007, the *MZ/AoD* covers had Ash replaced by other zombified characters.

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